

Research Note

The Use of the Gospel of John during the Easter Season in the Three-Year Lectionary

While detractors of the three-year lectionary often portray it as a *de novo* departure from the church's historic practice, the reality is a bit more complicated. Those who shaped the lectionary in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council immersed themselves in the development of the lectionary over the centuries.¹ To some degree they leapfrogged back in time before the Middle Ages to appropriate practices of the early church, such as the continuous reading of particular books of the Bible (*lectio continua*),² noting how this earlier practice grew (at least to some degree) out of a similar synagogue practice.³

One can liken the work of the designers of the three-year lectionary to that of digging beneath the foundations of the historic lectionary and building upon a more ancient foundation that nevertheless respected many aspects of the lectionary that had been handed down through the centuries. The recovery of readings from the Old Testament surely resulted from this approach.⁴ Likewise, the reading from the Acts of the Apostles during the Easter season also built upon ancient traditions. Examples include the Gelasian and Mozarabic lectionaries in the West,⁵ and in the East the early fifth-century Jerusalem lectionary, as well as the Jacobite lectionary.⁶

¹ Normand Bonneau, *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual, Word, Paschal Shape* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 23–24. More detail can be found in Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948–1975*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 409–414.

² Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Age*, vol. 2 of *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 51. See also Joseph Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*, trans. Francis A. Brunner, 2 vols. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1951/1955; reprint, Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1986), 1:398.

³ See Edward Foley, *From Age to Age: How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 21–23; and Bonneau, *Sunday Lectionary*, 6–7. A more detailed description is given in Charles Perrot, “The Reading of the Bible in the Ancient Synagogue,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading, and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 137–159.

⁴ See Jungmann's description of the continued use of OT readings in the early church in *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, 1:394–396. For a specific example, namely the Jacobite lectionary, which includes lists of readings with two OT readings for each Sunday and feast, see Old, *The Patristic Age*, 278–292.

⁵ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Medieval Church*, vol. 3 of *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 107–108 (Mozarabic), 158–160 (Gelasian).

⁶ Old, *The Patristic Age*, 158–159 (Jerusalem), 290–292 (Jacobite). An even earlier attestation to this practice is found in the fifty-five *lectio continua* sermons on Acts that Chrysostom likely preached during Eastertide. See *A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series*, ed. Philip Schaff, 14 vols. (New York: 1886–89; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson

A particularly telling insight into the thought process of those who developed the three-year lectionary concerns the use of the Gospel of John. Inquiring minds often ask why the fuller use of the Scriptures mandated by the Second Vatican Council resulted in a three-year lectionary and not a four-year. A very practical reason concerned the nature of the fourth Gospel. Unlike the synoptic Gospels, many of the accounts in the Gospel of John are quite lengthy, whether the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42), the bread-of-life discourse (John 6:22–59), the healing of the man born blind (John 9:1–41), or the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1–44). With such lengthy accounts, it is hardly surprising that John’s Gospel contains far fewer pericopes. As a result, there simply would not have been enough self-contained readings to devote a whole year to the fourth Gospel.

The framers of the three-year lectionary thus chose to treat the Gospel of John much as it had been for well over a millennium, with significant passages appointed especially during the seasons of Lent and Easter.⁷ This study will examine the use of John’s Gospel in the Easter season, demonstrating how the three-year lectionary gives a full-throated nod to tradition while simultaneously strengthening the lectionary’s witness to the resurrection and advancing a comprehensive use of Jesus’ Upper Room discourse.

The following chart provides the Gospel readings for the Easter season in the one-year lectionary:

	One-Year Lectionary
Easter Sunday	Mark 16:1–8
Easter 2 <i>Quasimodo Geniti</i>	John 20:19–31 <i>The Lord’s appearance on Easter evening and his revelation to Thomas on the eighth day</i>
Easter 3 <i>Misericordias Domini</i>	John 10:11–16 <i>Good shepherd</i>
Easter 4 <i>Jubilate</i>	John 16:16–22 <i>“A little while”; joy following childbirth</i>
Easter 5 <i>Cantate</i>	John 16:5–15 <i>The helper will convict of sin, righteousness, and judgment</i>
Easter 6 <i>Rogate</i>	John 16:23–30 (16:31–33) <i>“Ask in my name. . . I have overcome the world”</i>
Easter 7 <i>Exaudi</i>	John 15:26–16:4 <i>The helper will bear witness</i>
Pentecost Day	John 14:23–31 <i>The helper will teach; “peace I leave you”</i>

Publishers, 1994), 11:1. See also John A. Lamb, “The Place of the Bible within the Liturgy,” in *From the Beginnings to Jerome*, ed. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), 573, for references to sermons of Chrysostom and Augustine that attest to the reading of Acts from Easter to Pentecost.

⁷ Examples include the Mozarabic lectionary; see Old, *The Medieval Church*, 103–108, and also the reforms of Gregory the Great, 177–178.

Unquestionably, the fourth Gospel has long figured prominently during this season. Following the account of the resurrection on Easter and the following Sunday, the tradition made a brief stop at John 10 before heading to the Upper Room discourse (John 13–17), while making no attempt to use all of it.

It is useful to note how the framers of the three-year lectionary shaped the first three Sundays of the Easter season:

	Series A	Series B	Series C
Easter Sunday	Matthew 28:1–10	Mark 16:1–8	Luke 24:1–12
Easter 2	John 20:19–31 <i>The Lord's appearance on Easter evening and his revelation to Thomas on the eighth day</i>		
Easter 3	Luke 24:13–35 <i>Emmaus account</i>	Luke 24:36–49 <i>Easter evening</i>	John 21:1–14 (21:15–19) <i>Jesus at the sea-shore</i>
Easter 4	John 10:1–10 <i>Jesus as gatekeeper and the door</i>	John 10:11–18 <i>"I am the good shepherd"</i>	John 10:22–33 <i>"My sheep hear my voice"</i>

For Easter Sunday itself, they followed the practice of utilizing the parallel accounts of Jesus' resurrection from Matthew 28, Mark 16, and Luke 24.⁸ For the Second Sunday of Easter, the three-year lectionary follows the historic practice of reading from John 20, which records the account of Jesus' first and second encounters with the disciples cowering behind locked doors. With the Third Sunday of Easter, a change from the tradition appears. The historic practice of reading John 10 is pushed back a week in order to provide the faithful the opportunity to hear accounts of the other post-resurrection appearances of the risen Christ. Series A assigns the account of Jesus' appearance on the road to Emmaus; series B continues with the concluding verses of Luke 24; and series C includes the account of Jesus' appearance on the sea-shore recorded in John 21. In the historic practice, these three pericopes were assigned to Easter Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, respectively. Given the reality that very few congregations offer services on these days—and when they do, a very small percentage of the congregation actually attends—framers of the three-year lectionary believed this rearrangement to be of significant benefit to the faithful. With the resurrection accounts fully proclaimed over the three years, the Fourth Sunday of Easter is now given to the emphasis on the good shepherd, or, more precisely, to a comprehensive reading of all of John 10 over the course of the three years.

⁸ A similar procedure is found in the assignment of readings for the First Sunday in Advent, the Baptism of Our Lord, and the Transfiguration of Our Lord, where parallel accounts from the three synoptics are utilized over the course of the three years.

In the historic practice, the last four Sundays of the Easter season drew Gospel readings from Jesus' Upper Room discourse:

One-Year Lectionary	
Easter 4 <i>Jubilate</i>	John 16:16–22 <i>“A little while”; joy following childbirth</i>
Easter 5 <i>Cantate</i>	John 16:5–15 <i>The helper will convict of sin, righteousness, and judgment</i>
Easter 6 <i>Rogate</i>	John 16:23–30 (16:31–33) <i>“Ask in my name. . . I have overcome the world”</i>
Easter 7 <i>Exaudi</i>	John 15:26–16:4 <i>The helper will bear witness</i>

Of particular interest are the pericopes for the Fifth and Seventh Sundays of Easter, in which Jesus' promise of the Spirit figures prominently. It was undoubtedly this feature of the Upper Room discourse (John 13–17) with its multiple references to the Spirit that suggested their inclusion during the church's observance of the fifty days of Easter, the culmination of which was the celebration of the giving of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. From a practical standpoint, this was as good a way as any of using the Upper Room discourse, given that those chapters contain far more material than could possibly be used during Holy Week, or even more specifically on Holy Thursday.

The three-year distribution of Gospel readings for the remaining Sundays of the Easter season reveals a systematic use of nearly all of Jesus' Upper Room discourse:

	Series A	Series B	Series C
Easter 5	John 14:1–14 <i>The way, the truth, and the life</i>	John 15:1–8 <i>“I am the vine”</i>	John 16:12–22 <i>The Spirit will guide; sorrow turned to joy</i> or John 13:31–35 <i>A new commandment</i>
Easter 6	John 14:15–21 <i>Another helper; “I will not leave you as orphans”</i>	John 15:9–17 <i>Commandment to love; “I chose you”</i>	John 16:23–33 <i>“Ask in my name. . . I have overcome the world”</i> or John 5:1–9 <i>Healing at the pool on the Sabbath</i>
Easter 7	John 17:1–11 <i>High priestly prayer</i>	John 17:11b–19 <i>High priestly prayer</i>	John 17:20–26 <i>High priestly prayer</i>

The Fifth and Sixth Sundays of Easter cover three of the chapters, namely, John 14 in series A, John 15 in series B, and John 16 in series C. Included here are significant sayings of Jesus, such as the familiar passages “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) and “I am the vine; you are the branches” (John 15:5). While it is

the case that several of the texts that the three-year lectionary adds are appointed for festivals, such as John 14:1–14 for St. Philip and St. James, a familiar challenge presents itself, namely, few congregations provide (and even fewer people attend) services on those days.

Another significant addition provided in the three-year lectionary concerns the Seventh Sunday of Easter, which appoints Jesus’ high priestly prayer from John 17 to be read in its entirety over the course of the three years:

	Series A	Series B	Series C
Easter 7	John 17:1–11	John 17:11b–19	John 17:20–26

These texts, which are totally absent in the historic lectionary, are especially apt at this point in the church year, given that just one week later the church celebrates the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. Though Jesus prayed this prayer for his followers seven weeks earlier, the implications behind his words began to take on added significance once the Spirit sent the apostles on their way as they fulfilled the Lord’s mandate to take the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8, which is appointed for the Ascension of Our Lord).

Finally, for the Day of Pentecost the three-year lectionary appoints three different Gospel texts, all taken once again from the Gospel of John, two providing further coverage of the Upper Room discourse:

	Series A	Series B	Series C
Pentecost Day	John 7:37–39 <i>“If anyone thirsts”; promise of the Spirit</i>	John 15:26–27, 16:4b–15 <i>The helper will con- vict of sin, right- eousness, and judg- ment</i>	John 14:23–31 <i>The helper will come; “my peace I leave to you”</i>

The unique feature of this feast day is that the historical account comes not from the Holy Gospel for the day but from the second reading (Acts 2). The Gospel reading in this case draws on various teachings of Jesus concerning the Spirit.

While at first glance the three-year lectionary might seem to be a radical departure from the lectionary that began to take shape in the early Middle Ages, the situation is more complex than that. While the goal of the Second Vatican Council was for a richer fare of the Scriptures to be set before the faithful, this was not accomplished haphazardly. Building upon ancient practices, the three-year lectionary strives for a balance between variety and constancy, with key accounts repeated, either with the same text every year (e.g., John 20 on Easter 2) or with parallel (e.g., the resurrection accounts on Easter Sunday) or similar accounts (e.g., the readings

for the Day of Pentecost). The final result is that texts silenced for centuries in the Sunday assembly can be heard so that the fullness of God's word may go forth.

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